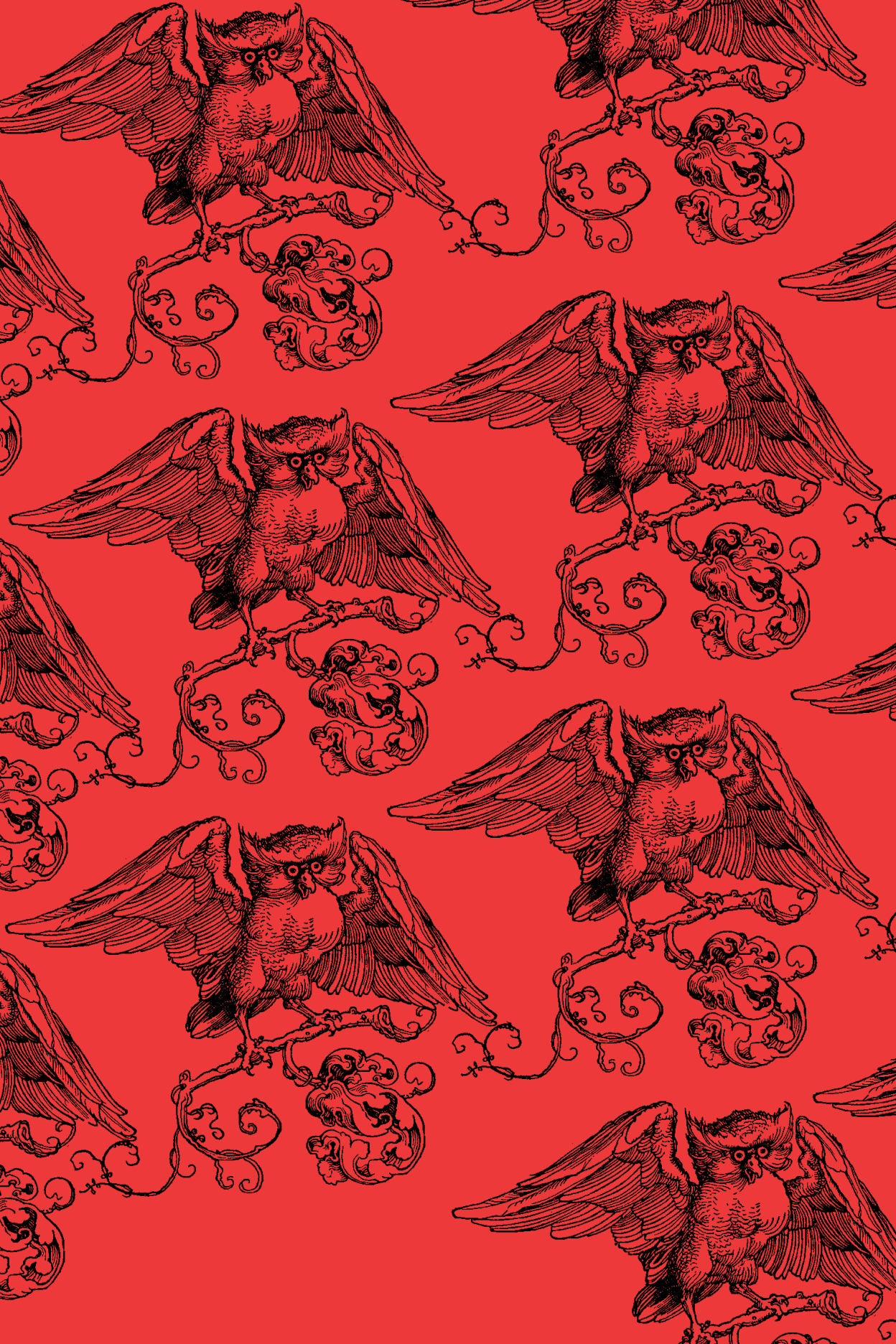


The **P**lague  
**P**salms

Joel  
Allegretti









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**P**salms

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*Pittsburgh, PA*

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Third edition, 2013

This is the 207th publication of  
THE POET'S PRESS  
2209 Murray Avenue #3  
Pittsburgh, PA 15217  
ISBN 0-922558-74  
[www.poetspress.org](http://www.poetspress.org)

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## The Plague Psalms



*To my mother,  
Mildred Allegretti,  
and to the memory  
of my father,  
John E. Allegretti  
(1926-2000)*



I WOULD CHISEL  
AN ALTAR...



## THE MOON BETRAYED

The moon was jealous of you,  
because the tide  
(the rebellious, smitten tide)  
renounced its sway  
to lap at your feet  
like a hungry spaniel;  
because werewolves  
ravaged branch and brier to come  
and be tamed  
at your knee;  
because Diana  
(the wild lunar huntress, Diana)  
suckled you  
and called you "Daughter."

And because the moon was jealous of you,  
it turned away its pallid eye  
and delivered to the night  
a blind and stumbling earth.

And because the moon  
(the despondent, selfish moon)  
withholds its light,  
travelers loiter at your doorstep,  
like sinners at the confessional,  
in search of a lantern to guide them  
through the infinite darkness.

And all because the moon  
was jealous of you.

## MORTIFICATION

You have a disciple  
who comes to you  
on his knees.  
He combs your hair  
with his fingers,  
ties it into braids  
and binds his wrists.  
He sweeps the dust  
from your floors  
and eats the leavings  
from your table.  
He searches the night  
alone.  
This is his method  
of achieving sainthood  
in your eyes.

## DOXOLOGY

Be a cathedral  
for me,  
with vaulted ceilings  
that house the praise-misted air  
and a canticled soul  
recumbent in the choirloft  
amid the psalmody of flute-throated boys.

Be an unrepentant whore  
for me,  
a ragged baggage  
whose bloated thighs  
crackle with disease,  
who says,  
“This is my body, this is my blood,”  
as the fleas rouse themselves to feast.

Be a harp of David  
for me,  
with prayer-plated strings  
tempered in the heat of the first Breath,  
which brought waves  
to oceans  
and orbits  
to moons.

Be a creature of Hell  
for me,  
a baying goat-footed thing,  
viper-tailed  
and salmon-scaled,  
whose pustulant tongue froths  
with the renunciation of grace.



Be a paraclete  
for me,  
a Christ-eyed mercy bearer,  
and plead my case in dove tones  
before an eternity-scented jury  
that counts my wrongdoings,  
sin by measured sin,  
upon an abacus of gallstones.

## SONG

Whisper to me of an unclaimed Paradise  
in a voice so sweet and true,  
angels would fall forever silent  
simply to hear you utter one solitary syllable.

Tell me of a realm of clouds and condolence  
where the outcast is crowned,  
the beggar is welcome to lay his head  
upon a lady's pillow,  
and the rents of my heart are healed  
with each precious caress you offer it.

Sing me to sleep with a lullaby  
about a mother who grieved  
to see her son endure the degradation  
wrought by mockery and shattered bones,  
whose tears evaporated at last  
under the unearthly light that beamed  
from the body redeemed.

## WHITE MADONNA

I would chisel an altar  
from Carrara's finest marble,  
greater than the length of the Nile,  
and rest it on cedar pillars.  
Then, I would spread a blue napkin,  
which I would pretend was  
Mary's shawl of virtue,  
and on it I would lay  
one strand of your hair.

I would pluck an infant robin  
from its crib of twigs  
and hold it until it pecked  
my flesh to tatters.  
Then, I would come to you  
with cupped hands and offer  
a blood oblation.

I would powder every inch of your body  
until a mourning dove  
thought of you as its mother.  
Then, I would smile at heaven,  
I would smile in arrogance at heaven,  
and defy it to send down a whiter snow.

I would travel the merciless night  
and bring the serpent of my regret  
for you to crush  
beneath your sandaled heel.  
Then, I would curl at your ankles  
to smell the honey fragrance of your  
hem,  
as you gathered me  
into the cradle of your protection.



## THE AL-ANDALUS SEQUENCE



## FOREIGN LOVE

*Yalla, Habibi,  
Yalla, Habibi,  
Yalla, Habibi,  
Yalla, Habibi.*

Andalusian Beauty,  
I see you have traveled  
the foreign roads  
from your father's house  
to bring me apricots  
and peppermint tea.

Does this mean  
you will be mine?

Andalusian Beauty,  
I know your father  
slights me  
because I praise the cross,  
because my mouth  
has tasted wine,  
because I speak  
the language of the unfaithful.



Andalusian Beauty,  
say goodbye  
to your father's house.  
Be with me  
on the banks of the Guadalquivir.  
We shall move  
like starlings through windows  
in search of a new homeland.  
We shall leave  
no trace of our passage.  
We shall give our hearts  
to a nation of our own design.

*Yalla, Habibi,*  
*Yalla, Habibi,*  
*Yalla, Habibi,*  
*Yalla, Habibi.*

## SPANISH SONG OF MERCY

A young widow from Granada,  
her sorrow hidden  
within the black lace cobweb  
    of her mantilla,  
whose blood — I believe —  
now moistens  
the filigreed mosaics  
    of the Alhambra,  
came to me  
in the kind of summer dream  
that occurs when the night  
seethes with the belligerence  
    of fireflies  
and the implication  
    of storms.

At my threshold,  
she lingered in her melancholy,  
and I welcomed her in  
to shed her sadness  
    beneath my caress.

Her foot fell upon my carpet,  
and lo!

it became a talon.

She placed her hand in mine,  
and lo!

it became a wing.

Her mouth reached to kiss me,  
and lo!

it became a beak.

She gave her voice to the *saeta*,  
and lo!

it became a screech.

Her braid brushed against my cheek,  
and lo!

it became a feather.

I rose from my pillow to embrace her,  
and lo!

I became an arrow.

## SAETA

O Virgin of the scorched clay,  
bound in sky-swept muslin,  
whose matchless flesh  
steams with the perfumes  
of Sevilla's orange blossoms,  
pierce the damask curtain  
of my inconsolable soul  
with an arrow of devotion.

I am the mute guitar  
whose dead strings  
long to recover  
their lost fandango.

I am the disciple  
who has renounced  
his teacher's treachery.  
I am now the votary of desolation.

I am the restless ghost  
of a Moorish astronomer  
who died before he completed  
his treatise on the stars.

I am the resurrected inquisitor:  
My gloves are sewn from the loins  
of a Sephardic Jew whom I condemned  
in 1492.

Pour compassion on my shoulders  
as if it were a sweet lotion.  
Bathe me in a brook  
that flows with paschal blood.  
Teach me the benevolence  
of open wounds.

I shall close my eyes  
so that you may caress my lashes.  
I shall give my hands over  
to the composition of praise songs  
and lamentations.  
I shall strip my tongue naked  
until it can express nothing  
but the desire for penance.

O Matriarch who guides us into solitude,  
May our bones ache with forgiveness,  
May swallows bear your halo,  
May the valley be a baptismal font  
of your tears,  
May the branches of olive trees  
lift themselves toward heaven  
like the arms of supplicants,  
and may the vines of Cordoba's arbors  
forever wind  
into the shape of your immaculate heart.

# AL'UD

*For Davey Graham,  
Master of the Resounding Strings*

*Unanimities and Felicities  
in Praise of the Oud*

—title of a medieval treatise on Arab musicology  
by Ibn Yunus

## I. INVOCATION

Praises!

Praises!

and again

Praises!

May they

and all felicitations

irrigate your heaven-drenched strings,

Wooden Seraph,

whose ruby-bright throat

secretes divine murmurs.



## II. DECLARATION

From you,  
Beloved Lute,  
a song is a thread,  
a serpentine,  
flaxen thread  
that binds  
the thousand branches  
of the lemon groves.  
Your melodies are as languid  
as a caterpillar.  
As savory  
as a houri's buttery haunches.  
As primal  
as the red  
sun-gouged earth.  
As heartbroken  
as the fallen Moor,  
who surrendered blood  
for theology,  
who, in millennia passing,  
cries from his grass-laden grave  
in undulant counterpoint  
to each of your subtle  
vibrations:

*Andalucia!*

### III. SUPPLICATION

Blessed Oud,  
O Lute  
among lutes,  
what inimitable waters  
nursed the trees  
that sired you?

Adorn  
the Iberian night  
with love-song braids  
and tie them to the stars  
that burn at the farthest corner  
of the universe.

Summon away from his peace  
the soul of your master.  
Summon away from his grace  
the soul of your finest master  
and let him dwell,  
and dwell happily,  
within  
my hungry fingertips.

#### **IV. INCANTATION**

Al'ud

Al'ud

Al'ud

Allah!

# THE LAST MOOR DEPARTS FROM SPAIN AND REFUSES TO MOURN

*By the morning hours  
And by the night when it is stillest,  
Thy Lord hath not forsaken thee  
nor doth He hate thee.*  
— *The Koran*

But the night has discarded  
the crescent moon,  
and none but the cicadas  
call me to prayer  
on this morning.

The finger cymbals have ceased  
to ring  
for the hips of dancers.  
The lutes have slackened  
their strings;  
Rabat has reclaimed  
their courting songs.  
A bewildered wind prowls  
the Alhambra's barren warrens  
in search of a virgin's hair  
to rustle.

O Sevilla!  
O Cordoba!  
O Granada!  
Your names  
have become names,  
and names alone!

A priest strings olives  
    into a rosary.  
A rabbi eats  
    his phylacteries.  
A lamb lifts its head  
    from the chopping block  
    and bleats toward Rome.

My walls reflect  
    the quiet flicker  
    of votive candles.  
I go to my knees,  
    kiss the soil,  
and I cut my lips  
    on my grandfather's skeleton.

A ship waits in the harbor,  
    rocking,  
rocking,  
    rocking,  
    returning.

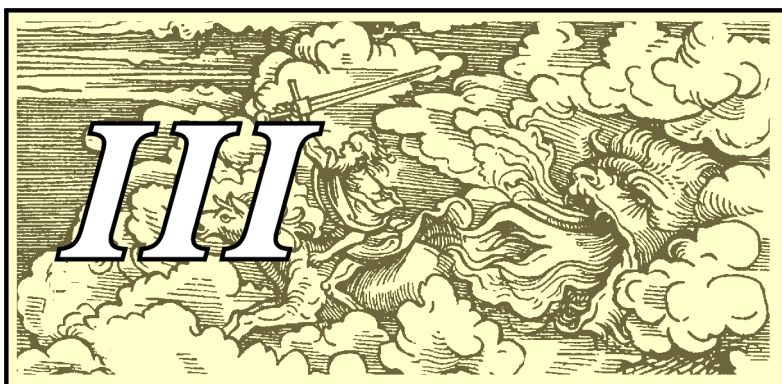
I climb to the bow,  
    I close my eyes,  
    and I listen.

I listen.

I listen.

I hear ...

A pig grunting in the marketplace.



THE NAME  
OF THE NAME



## THE SINGER

I sang for the winds,  
And the winds fled sails,  
Fled trees,  
And carried my echo to Egypt.

I sang for the nightingales,  
And the nightingales in fury  
Smashed their beaks  
Because their song could not compete.

I sang for the cobra,  
And the cobra, with withered hood,  
Bared its fangs  
And dulled them against the rocks.

I sang for the beggar,  
And the beggar, concealing his sores,  
Overturned his cup  
And offered me his alms.

I sang for the lovers,  
And the lovers, hearing me sing,  
Broke their embrace  
And sweetened my linens at dusk.

I sang for the physician,  
And the physician emptied his flasks  
And showed his patients  
The way to my room.

I sang for the Lord,  
And the Lord singed my tongue,  
Because I sang for others  
Before I sang for the Lord.



## THE HASHISHIN

*...slay not the life  
which Allah hath made sacred,  
save in the course of justice.*

— *The Koran*

Be guided,  
Intoxicated Martyr,  
by narcotic blossoms  
and Gibril's recitations.

Go forth  
with the sword and the surah  
and the menace of your reputation.  
Go forth  
upon the melodies of the oud  
and the santour.  
Go forth  
upon the ravishing smoke  
that ascends like a purified soul  
from the depths of the waterpipe.

Be mad with the promise  
of a mountain paradise.  
Fulfill your contract  
and be justified  
by the certainty of sainthood.  
Let the most glorified of Names  
echo from your lips  
like a perfect love song.

Cry out the most glorified of Names,  
which soothes like the shade of the date palm,  
which is as merciful as rain,  
which is as ruthless as a plague of flies.

Speed your enemies  
on their pilgrimage  
to damnation.  
Proceed by night  
and by night alone.  
Infiltrate their dreams.  
Poison their wells.  
Inflame their houses.  
Sacrifice their first-born.  
Make them tremble before the syllables  
that bind to form your terrible epithet:

Hashishin!  
Assassin!

# SONG OF THE GOLEM

## I.

*And the Lord God formed man  
of the dust of the ground,  
and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life;  
and man became a living soul.*

—Genesis, 2:7

*Thine eyes did see my substance, yet being imperfect;  
and in thy book all my members were written,  
which in continuance were fashioned,  
when as yet there was none of them.*

—Psalm 139

*With an anxiety that almost amounted to agony,  
I collected the instruments of life around me,  
that I might infuse a spark of being  
into the lifeless thing that lay at my feet.*

—Mary Shelley,  
*Frankenstein*

## II.

In the corridors of heaven  
he dwells  
in the radiance of the Almighty.  
He is called Adam Kadmon,  
The Archetype,  
and we are but what he sees  
when he gazes  
into the mirror of the universe.

### III.

Word.

It began with the Word.

The Word among words.

A syllable.

An audible breath.

An utterance,

by which the dust

united into flesh

and the clay

lengthened into bone.

What was the word

that brought the light

to the eyes of Man?

What was the word

that drew his immaculate body

from the mire?

Ask Judah Loew,

Rabbi of Prague,

whose just heart

trembled and wept

over rumors of a blood libel

and Eastertide retaliations

for the Passion of the Nazarene,

whose persecuted hands unraveled the scrolls

to prowl the margins of the lord of books.

Like a seafarer upon tempestuous

and unknown tides,

he navigated numbers and genealogies

in pursuit of the ultimate Word.

#### IV.

Within the Book  
resides the Name.  
Decipher the Book  
and reveal the Name.  
Speak the Name  
and command an object  
to Be.

What is the Name?

*The Name is omnipotent.*

What is the Name?

*The Name is perpetual.*

What is the Name?

*The Name is the Name.*

What is the Name?

*The Name is the life-endowing Name.*

What is the Name?

*The Name is ...*

## YHWH

#### V.

His Eyes were the Eyes  
that fired the sun.  
His Arms were the Arms  
that gathered the stars.  
His Voice was the Voice  
that sang to the sea.  
His Hand was the Hand  
that banished the night.  
His Heart was the Heart  
that beat for the world.

His Love was the Love  
that pardoned our wrongs.

By the Name Eternal,  
By the Name Incomparable,  
By the Name Triumphant,  
Awaken your granite limbs,  
Ascend from the absence of life,  
Arise from your earth  
and condemn to impotence  
the venom of malice  
that boils outside our walls.

His ancient aspect  
a ledger that recorded  
the miseries of the ghetto Jew,  
Rabbi Loew bent his troubled head  
into the sculpted ear  
and sent forth the divine noun  
upon his desperate exhalation.

## YHWH

And behold!  
There upon the temple floor,  
His shadow was joined by a shadow.

## VI.

Ring the bells!  
Ring the joyous bells!  
Ring them at the break of day!  
Ring them till the twilight hours!

Pluck the harps!  
Bow the fiddles!  
Blow the flutes  
and strum the lutes!  
Beat upon the drums!  
Beat upon the goat-skin drums!

Let there be  
an evening of psalmody,  
of dreidels,  
of honey cakes and wine!

Then sing in exaltation!  
Oh, sing in endless exaltation!

*Honor is owed to the Father,  
Honor is His alone,  
For the man we have made  
    of prayer and of clay,  
This guardian of stone.*

## VII.

And the Word is  
Truth.



THE PLAGUE  
PSALMS





## THE PLAGUE PSALMS

### I.

*Ring around the rosie,  
Pocketful of posies,  
Ashes, ashes,  
All fall down.*

So sweetly gamboling,  
in guileless innocence,  
from the pink lips of happy children,  
this paean to a blood-greedy microbe.

### II.

It began with the trader ships,  
homeward bound from eastern ports,  
hulls sated with cardamom and cedar  
and a more insidious cargo that embarked  
on the haunches of stowaway vermin.  
With each nautical mile a man fell  
until the deck was a salted bier,  
the sail, a flag of surrender  
to the pestilent buccaneer,  
and the galley itself,  
a mausoleum hung with barnacle garlands.  
Not merely the passing of ailing men,  
this was a sentence imposed by a pitiless magistrate  
whose gavel was the mandibles of a parasite.

It begins when the flesh bubbles  
like broiled cheddar,  
and the blood gurgles in the veins  
like molten lead.

And the sound that passes  
for the creaking of hinges on closing doors  
is the plea-bargaining of bones  
seeking parole from incarceration  
in condemned anatomies.

*Blood was its Avatar and its seal —  
the redness and the horror of blood.*

—Edgar Allan Poe, *The Masque of the Red Death*

### III.

“I am wealthy,” the nobleman said  
from the sick room window,  
“I will give you an armful of gold  
if you come to my bedside  
and lift a goblet to my mouth,  
for I am too feeble to slake my thirst alone.”  
He announced this every hour on the hour,  
day and night,  
until the fever, at last, abducted his voice  
Forever.

*Wind-blown we bloom,  
Wind-blown decay;  
With weeping we come  
And so pass away.*

—Anonymous English Poet, c. 13th Century

#### IV.

In the Florence of Boccaccio's day,  
Beneath the muslin funeral pall,  
They called it *gavocciolo*,  
As they tumbled, one and all.

"*Gavocciolo*," the figure chimed,  
black clad and scarlet eyed.

"Pardon?"

"*Gavocciolo*."

"What is it? Something to eat?"

"Yes. It is served with the reddest  
and most succulent of gravies.  
It is that and more, besides."

"Is it a type of dance?"

"Yes. Such a dance as skeletons do,  
keeping time with the chattering  
of their bicuspid.  
It is that and more, besides."

"Is it a musical direction?"

"Yes. It means to play in the style  
of a man whose soul has just left him."

V.

*And they took ashes of the furnace  
and stood before Pharaoh; and Moses sprinkled it  
up to heaven; and it became a boil breaking forth  
with blains upon man, and upon beast.*

—Exodus, 9:10

*Ding dong, ding dong,*  
“Bring out your dead!”  
*Ding dong, ding dong,*  
“Bring out your dead!”

Below a bloodless sky,  
amid the remnants of dawn,  
amid the remnants of a cold, fallow dawn,  
a procession creeps and crawls  
like a roving centipede  
through muddy streets that smolder  
with the vapors of sinister incinerations.  
A priest with incense and prayer book  
guides his complement of sextons,  
who stagger about after a night-long revelry  
baptized in ale  
to numb themselves for the morning’s vile labor.

“Bring out your dead!”  
*Ding dong, ding dong.*

Rumbling along on grave-heavy wheels,  
the death cart is loaded high  
with merchandise for the tomb,  
limbs and torsos entwined like an obscene trellis.  
Look! The rich man’s arm straddles  
the poor man’s shoulder.

O Death!

You, the glorious integrator!

The impartial arbiter, in whose eyes  
all men are spared the indignity of prejudice!

A castle and a hovel are both built of walls and floors,  
and the odor of a dying man's breath

is not any sweeter  
simply because his purse weighs more.

**VI.**  
**THE PRAYER OF THE FLAGELLANTS**

With these leather thongs,  
O Just and Merciful Lord,  
I rend the abject flesh  
that encages my imperishable spirit.

*(Lash!)*

By their sting,  
I shall flow the crimson drivel  
that animates my being,  
as sap nourishes the poplar tree.

*(Lash!)*

In this manner,  
may You grant me clemency  
as You visit Your wrath  
upon a petty and ungrateful race.

*(Lash!)*

In humility and remorse,  
I shall wander from town to town  
clothed in rags and my own shredded hide,  
like the meanest of beggars,  
appealing for neither alms nor meat,  
but rather, the fraternity of fellow penitents.

*(Lash!)*

In the Name of the Father,  
the Son  
and the Holy Ghost.

Amen.

*(Lash!)*

## VII.

O wise and skilled physician,  
dear progeny of Hippocrates,  
see how my arteries rust and corrode?  
Drain them, I implore you,  
with any apparatus at your command.  
Use scalpels,  
                    leeches,  
                                    vampires.  
Cleanse me and give me blood anew,  
so that I may consort again with the living  
and praise the miracle of creation.

## VIII.

*Fire and fleet and candlelight,  
And Christ receive thy soul.*  
—*The Lyke-Wake Dirge*

*Kyrie eleison,  
Christe eleison,  
Kyrie eleison,  
Christe eleison.*

*Confiteor Deo Omnipotenti.*

O Monarch of Earth and Ether,  
I confess to avarice,  
                    *Sanctus*  
I confess to blasphemy,  
                    *Sanctus*  
                    *Sanctus*



I confess to lust,  
    *Sanctus*  
    *Sanctus*  
    *Sanctus*  
I confess to sanctimony,  
    *Ave Maria*  
I confess to iniquity,  
    *Dominus vobiscum*  
I confess to hypocrisy,  
    *et cum spiritu tuo*  
I confess,  
    I confess,  
        I confess ...

*Hic desinunt Psalmi Pestilentiae*  
(Here end the Plague Psalms)



THE ARCHITECTURE  
OF PENANCE



## THE BASILISK

We burn,  
and we yearn  
and yearn  
to burn  
like the optic  
furnace of this cruel  
    and  
fabled serpent,  
burn to shake  
an impassive universe  
from its languor,  
to force atoms  
    to tremble  
and asteroids  
    to freeze  
in mid-trajectory  
across said universe.

## AT GOLGOTHA

The road to grace,  
Laid with skulls.  
My father's mansion,  
Built with skulls.  
My father's ears,  
Deaf like skulls.  
My father's tongue,  
Mute like skulls.  
The eyes of mercy,  
Blind like skulls.  
My naked flesh,  
White like skulls.  
My drinking cup,  
Dry like skulls.  
The clouds, all clouds,  
Shaped like skulls.  
On lowly knees,  
I pray with skulls.  
My closing hour,  
I bleed with skulls.

## VESPERTILICIDE

*Ves-per-til'i-cide, n. 1. The killing of a bat. 2. One who kills bats. [ $< L < vespertilio$  bat + *caedere* to kill]*

*Le moi est haissable*  
(The self is hateful)

—Blaise Pascal

The folkloric agents  
have no place here.  
Instead, mince the garlic  
to season a holiday lamb.  
Drive the freshly sharpened stake  
into fertile ground  
and lash a sapling to it.  
Nail the Crucifix three feet  
above your bed  
(one foot per third  
of the Trinity)  
and come nightfall,  
pray.

You do this  
because the folkloric agents  
have no place here.

What you need is rage.  
Let it creep,  
head first,  
bound in black,  
down the sheer wall

of your thorax  
until it reaches  
the hollow of your belly  
and howls  
with lupine appetites.  
Then, open wide  
to free that rage  
and watch it take to the air  
on leather-webbed wings  
as it transubstantiates  
into a hate  
whose flight pattern  
spans oceans.  
Understand now:  
This hate will flap  
and flutter and squeak  
and skid across  
another day's end,  
propelled skyward  
by the repulsion it will feel  
over what it has become.  
By dawn,  
it will have clawed out  
its incarnadine eyes,  
chewed the fur  
from its horrid little belly  
and cracked  
its vespertilian skull  
against a campanile wall.

What remains  
will tumble  
and soil the patch of earth  
where it drops,  
to rot and rot  
and find its destiny

ELEGY FOR ERIK,  
ARCHITECT  
OF HOPELESS DESIRE,  
ANGEL OF MUSIC,  
OPERA HOUSE POLTERGEIST

*You see, Christine, some music is so terrible  
that it consumes everyone who approaches it.*

—Gaston Leroux, *The Phantom of the Opera*

What you longed for most  
was a lady's lap on which to lay  
the disgrace of flesh.  
She did not have to be beautiful.  
She did not have to possess  
mansions or carriages.  
Only pity  
and yes,  
a soul that celebrated music.  
Her fingers did not require  
the adornment of rings  
or manicured cuticles.  
They only had to be gentle  
and yes, loving,  
slipping backward along the contours  
of your benighted skin  
the way you drew the bow  
across the violin to play  
your sonatas of seduction.  
And yes, she would have had to sing to you,  
but not a Gounod aria or the *Magnificat*.



Only a lullaby  
or perhaps even  
(Oh Erik, how your heart would  
have danced if it were so!)  
a wedding song.

In Rouen,  
where you fled the solace of the womb,  
the song of the day was a dirge.  
It rained that morning,  
and your mother  
(what a delightful, pretty thing  
she was before you came, Erik)  
your mother said so calmly  
as you cried for a nourishing breast  
that it was only God spitting in her eye.

In Nizhni Novgorod,  
where you fled the denial of her kisses,  
the song of the day was an anthem.  
You created magic.  
Magic, Erik,  
and tales of your illusions  
echoed in the desolate caravan nights  
like the hooves of chamois  
pounding the wild steppes.

In Persia,  
where your legend teased a sovereign's fancy,  
the song of the day was a *tasnif*.  
You created mazes and mayhem.  
Mazes and mayhem, Erik,  
wicked amusements to jade  
the whimsies of a bored king.

But even the monarch's favorite  
must know that privilege can wither  
like a petal torn from the pomegranate.  
You had to flee, Erik,  
flee by night.  
May Allah guide and protect you.

In Paris,  
where your grave patiently waited,  
the song of the day was a requiem.  
It was your funeral song, Erik.  
Sad, wretched Erik,  
a Gallic Job in a satin cape and leather mask,  
dwelling in shadows and subterranean alcoves,  
tutoring the ungrateful Christine,  
blessing that unworthy pupil  
with the full measure of your mastery.  
Dreadful, devil-faced Erik,  
whose nobility shriveled on his lips  
when his mother turned away her delicate cheek,  
whose music was the lone sobbing  
of a battered, battered heart.

Who writhes in Hell, Erik?  
Who is there, charred in those chaotic fires,  
to match you for hopelessness?

All you wanted was a lady's lap  
on which to lay the disgrace of flesh.

The evening is luminous,  
luminous with larks and comets.  
It resounds with sanctus bells.  
There are candles.  
There are angels.

Angels, Erik.  
Tens upon hundreds  
upon thousands of angels.  
Angels with starlit wings.  
Wings that scrape the planets  
to make them spin.

Can you hear the angels, Erik?  
Lift your tired, unhappy head  
this one last moment and listen.  
Listen, Erik.  
The choirs sing for you.

God is good,  
God is great,  
God is just,  
God is kind.

*Au revoir,  
Monsieur l'Ange de la Musique.  
Dormez bien dans le berceau de l'éternité.  
Au revoir.*

(Goodbye,  
Mr. Angel of Music.  
Sleep well in the cradle of eternity.  
Goodbye.)

## MADRIGALS FOR LEPERS

Let us now proclaim  
to serpents and stars  
the way we salve our wounds.

Let us revel in our abnegation  
before serpents and stars  
over the way we dress our wounds.

Not with oil,  
not with orange water.  
Not with spikenard,  
not with hyssop.

But with spit  
and with tallow.  
But with salt  
and with bile.

We toast the day  
with laudanum  
and wear hair shirts  
to the supper table.

No more do we profess  
the glories of our heroes.  
Their necks ache  
under the weight of too many laurels.

Instead, we sing madrigals for lepers  
and rounds for madmen,  
they of the macerated tongue,  
they of the hobbled footstep.

For we are the choir,  
the choir contrite,  
and we have known,  
O we have known  
that redemption teeters  
on the tip of a thorn  
and sainthood lies  
at the bottom of a trough.

## BELLMAN OF THE DEAD

His clanging comes  
at one o'clock,  
commencing at the shuttered market,  
faint at first,  
more a clink than a clang,  
like sugar tongs against a teacup,  
sweet and delicate,  
a confection for the drowsy ear.  
It does not intrude on us.

His clanging comes  
at one o'clock.  
The clanging billows  
at our windowsills.  
It startles rats into gutter asylums  
and cats into the comfort of shadows.  
It heaves against our bedroom walls  
and tears at our nightshirts  
to wrest us from our dreams.

His clanging comes  
at one o'clock.  
He moves  
like a charnel-house vapor.  
He reeks of a solitary piety.  
We see the femurs and the tibias  
woven into his shabby sleeves,  
the craniums embellishing his cowl.  
His shoes are fouled with muck.  
Reverence has calloused his heels.

His clanging comes  
at one o'clock,  
and with the clanging  
comes his clamor.  
*Awake! Awake!*  
*Awake for the dead!*  
*The dead implore your prayers!*  
*Descend to your knees!*  
*Cripple your fingers with rosaries!*  
*Scorch your throats with Ave Marias!*  
*Pray for the dead! Pray for the dead!*

His clanging comes  
at one o'clock.  
He rattles our repose.  
He sunders our copulations.  
Our pillows are confounded  
by the sudden absence of our heads.  
We engrave the darkness  
with paternosters and misereres:  
for the admiral who eased  
the hunger of the sharks,  
for the blacksmith's wanton wife,  
for the doctor's stillborn daughter,  
for the pauper dead in paupers' fields,  
for all the named and nameless dead,  
for the dead,  
the dead,  
the dead,  
the dead.

His clanging comes  
at one o'clock.  
We are weary of the dead.  
The dead do not hear us.  
The dead do not thank us.  
The dead do not indulge us,  
but we indulge the dead.  
These prayers we pray,  
these prayers we proffer  
at the prodding of his din,  
we submit, as well,  
to our own selves,  
for they remind us  
and reassure us  
that we are alive  
and have not yet died  
when his clanging comes  
at one o'clock.



## WE TELL OF A MORNING

Sad was the morning,  
Was the moth-winged morning.  
Sad and grey,  
Grey as the marble marked  
For our markers,  
Was the morning,  
Was the moth-winged,  
Dew-spittled morning.  
And black were our coats,  
And white were our scarves,  
And black was the melancholy  
Which drank us down  
And belched us up.  
And black was the bark,  
The dying, white dogwood bark,  
O black was the bark  
In the morning,  
The moth-winged,  
Dew-spittled,  
Fog-blushed morning.  
And black was the color  
Of our true love's hair,  
The hair of our true  
Lamented love,  
Whom we mourned  
In the morning,

The moth-winged,  
Dew-spittled,  
Fog-blushed,  
Sparrow-shorn morning.  
Sad was the morning,  
And grey.  
Sad and grey  
The morning was.



THE ROOMS  
OF REDEMPTION



# THE LORD OF SONGS

*For Leonard Cohen*

Where is the Lord of Songs,  
Whose breath ripples  
the membrane of the drum,  
Whose fingers are the pegs  
of a cedar lute,  
Who issues His ballads  
on the backs of thrushes?

Where is the King of Psalms,  
Who danced in the sandalwood arbor,  
Who tossed His rhymes  
into the rosewater night,  
Who taught the harpmaker  
the architecture of strings  
and plucked the silence  
from the tongues of mutes?

Where is the Father of Canticles,  
Whose heart is a scripture,  
Who filled His scrolls  
with words of praise,  
Who forgave the defiant ear  
that would not listen  
to the words of praise,  
Who built the towers  
where His Name was preserved?

Lord of Songs,  
King of Psalms,  
Father of Canticles,  
it has taken days to write these lines.  
It is late now.  
Will You accept my effort?  
I wait for You to lay Your blessing  
on the crescents of my eyelids.

## VESPERS

A priest named Joseph  
brought me a crown of sparrows  
and laid it on a pinewood table  
in a garden fragrant with  
violets and peppermint.

The good father smiled and bowed  
as he took his leave  
and traced the Sign of the Cross  
with his pious and generous hands.

I lifted that wreath of dead birds,  
their beaks like brier thorns,  
their eyes like holly berries,  
their brown feathers like autumn debris,  
and carried it into the house.

That evening,  
I laid the sparrow ring  
on the quilted altar of my bed,  
adorned it with my grandmother's rosary,  
and slept on the cold floor  
of my kitchen.

I passed the night in peace.

# REGENERATION

It is said  
that for each death,  
there is a birth.

And so,  
now that the man  
who gave me  
his name  
has orphaned me,  
I shall go forth  
into the world  
to search  
for a child,  
a very young  
male child  
with an arch  
in his left eyebrow,  
black hair  
that converges  
on his forehead  
in a widow's peak,  
hazel eyes that gleam  
with intellect  
and insularity,  
a mouth designed  
for pronouncements,  
and feet that crave  
a pedestal.

When I find this child,  
I shall offer  
a prayer of thanks,  
draw him  
into my pilgrim clasp  
and whisper  
in his puzzled ear:  
"Father!  
You've come back!"

## THE SEDUCTION

Come back to the sea,  
O come back to the sea,  
Embittered Mariner,  
though battered  
by the flattery of sirens.  
The kraken is dead.  
The captain repents,  
and the breezes miss  
the folds of your hair.

Breathe now, Mariner.  
That fragrance of brine?  
Your beloved, of course.  
Your spurned,  
but absolving, beloved,  
whose wine-dark loins  
invite your return.

Come back to the sea.  
Forget the betrayals.  
Ignore the cries of the albatross.  
His malevolence is myth.  
His cackle is merely —  
that.  
It augurs nothing.

O come back to the sea,  
back to the way of the compass.  
Partake of the communion of the sails  
and seek the consolation of humility  
in the blistering of your hands,  
as you come back to the sea.

## BLOOD PILGRIMAGE

There is a ravine,  
and it is deep,  
deeper, even,  
than the requirements of Purgatory.  
It lies beyond  
the scholarship of cartographers.  
It lies where moonlight  
can never find it.  
It lies at an equal distance  
between the Himalayas  
and the Angel Gabriel's  
left eye.

And through it  
they rage.  
Frothing.  
Rabid.  
The wild rapids,  
as savage as jaguars,  
chastising the barrier rocks  
as they plunge  
toward the sea.

They rage  
like bats  
scattering doves  
from the treetops.

They rage  
like a pair of harpies,  
each shredding  
the other's wings  
over the last apple.



They rage  
like the blood I let  
as I, adrift and torn upon them,  
come to thee,  
O Sanctified One,  
who welcomes these scarlet stains  
on your unblemished feet.

## BLOOD REQUIEM

And after  
all my ballads  
are sung,  
I shall lay aside  
my strings,  
bless them with ashes  
and walk  
hand in hand  
with a shadow  
to board a ship of bones.

I crave passage  
upon a black  
and bitter sea,  
where gulls will crow  
my requiem.

I gaze  
into the mad,  
mad sky,  
where infinity  
batters the blue vault  
like an insurrection of  
chimney swifts.

And there,  
I shall sing  
and sing again  
like the blood  
that washes  
the ventricles of my heart.

I shall bow  
before the mercy seat  
when my voice  
at last is raw —

and ask the words  
that linger still  
to chant  
the praises of the Law.

# ANTHOLOGY OF HANDS

*The skeleton of the hand is subdivided  
into three segments —  
The Carpus, or wrist-bones; the Metacarpus,  
or bones of the palm;  
and the Phalanges, or bones of the digits.*  
—Gray's Anatomy

## I. PENELOPE

Weave and spin,  
weave and spin.  
A voice, once proud and fierce,  
now a whisper, no stronger than a foal,  
flees from Trojan chaos  
to descend like a moth upon my lobe.  
It lulls me, it lulls me.  
It promises me:  
He will come.  
Then, like an ostrich plume,  
it tickles the creases of my palms.  
Weave and spin,  
weave and spin,  
fingers, fingers,  
laboring like arachnids,  
weave and spin,  
weave and spin.

And now I hear another voice,  
many voices, chattering like locusts,  
defaming my hearth.  
“Brave and faithful Argive wife,  
your man’s blood discolors the ocean,  
his flesh fattens carrion birds,  
his name is now the ink  
from which great and glorious epics will flow.”  
Fingers, fingers,  
quickly, quickly,  
undo this damned embroidery.  
Unravel it,  
pull it, cut it,  
like the Fates upon man’s mortal thread.  
Enslave the loom.  
Work her until she whimpers.  
Weave and spin,  
weave and spin.  
Unravel, unravel,  
weave and spin.  
Unravel, unravel,  
weave.

## **II. MICHELANGELO**

The Patriarch David,  
in his final psalm,  
commanded mankind  
to laud the Father  
with psalteries  
and cymbals.

I choose the hammer and chisel,  
and the clang of iron against iron  
and iron against rock  
sings as sweetly  
to my Florentine ears  
as a well-tuned mandola.

For the hammer is an invocation,  
the chisel, a benediction.

My hands are priests,  
Thick, tired,  
pious clergymen  
clothed in vestments made of  
marble dust  
and swollen knuckles.

And how my priests can pray!  
Oh, you should hear them pray.  
With just an invocation  
and a benediction,  
they call forth  
the soul within the stone.

### **III. A THUGGEE PRAYER**

Kali, Kali,  
My hands are pledged to thee,  
Kali.  
A noose, Kali,  
A noose, Kali,  
I offer the breath  
of a traveler, Kali,  
the blood of a merchant  
for thee, Kali.  
Spiteful,  
Vengeful  
Mother Kali.  
Blessings, Kali,  
Blessings, Kali,  
Blessings upon these hands,  
Kali,  
which work to honor thee,  
Kali,  
which kill for love of thee,  
Kali.

#### **IV. JACK THE RIPPER**

*The Queen of Hearts,*  
*She made some tarts,*  
*All on a summer's day,*  
You're quite the tart,  
I'll take your heart,  
A whore's a pleasure to flay.



## **V. MANITAS DE PLATA**

The guitar is a woman,  
an infanta,  
a Sister of Mercy,  
a Moor's virgin niece,  
an old widow  
in a musty black shawl,  
a streetwalker from Malaga,  
a good wife,  
a shrew.  
With rosewood hips,  
an ebony clitoris  
and a voice of taut nylon.

I let her know that she is  
a woman.  
I coax her,  
stroke her,  
pluck her,  
send her vaulting into ecstasy  
with kisses made of thumb  
and forefinger.  
I grip her about the waist  
and draw her into my pelvis.  
I press her polished buttocks  
against my ribs.

I encroach upon the hollow  
vagina,  
and she resounds in harmonic  
climax.  
I unlock her passion,  
and she unlocks my passion.  
She is the sacrament of  
marriage.  
She is my giving spouse.  
She brings a true union.  
And this is why  
the guitar is a woman.

## **VI. JESUS CHRIST**

The blind. The deaf. The dumb. The demonic.

The lame. Lepers. Lazarus.

Water. Wine. Bread. Fishes.

A nail.

Another nail.

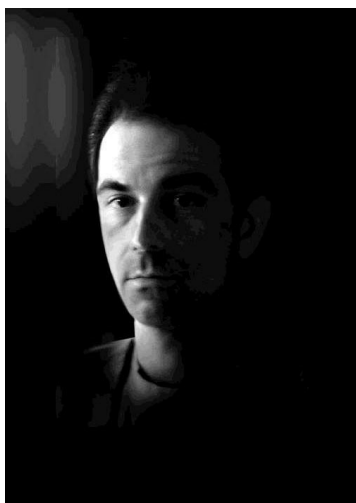
And then ...

The child's hand

clasps the father's hand.

Evermore.





Joel Allegretti has a multifaceted background that encompasses literature, music, journalism and business. Born and raised in New Jersey, where he still lives, he began writing poetry, stories and plays at an early age. As a teenager, he discovered music and learned to play the guitar, later extending his instrumental facility to the oud and harmonium. He continued to pursue music seriously, becoming a prolific composer in the process, and has performed publicly for more than two decades in concert, theater and on radio.

As a poet, Allegretti has delivered numerous featured readings, often incorporating music into his performances, and has presented his poetry in colleges, high schools, theatrical productions, and on television and radio.

A graduate of New York University with a degree in journalism and English, Allegretti began his professional life as a newspaper reporter and then moved into public relations, serving national and international organizations.

*The Plague Psalms* is his first collection of poems.



## ABOUT THIS BOOK

The type used in this book is Aldine, based on early typefaces created by Venetian printer Aldus Manutius, one of the great pioneering humanist printers and publishers. The headlines are set in Charlesworth, a face inspired by hand-lettering. The book design is by Brett Rutherford, using engravings by Albrecht Durer and other artists depicting Pestilence as one of the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse. This new edition restores the color design elements from the original limited edition printing. The first edition of this book was hand-bound, with a variety of different hand-made papers used for binding.

